

“Cheap Social Issue Novel Bullshit” versus the Power of the Personal Story

Karin Anderson. *What Falls Away*. Torrey House Press, 2023. 320 pp. Paper: \$18.76. ISBN: 978-1948814799.

Reviewed by Anne Papworth

“That’s just cheap social issue novel bullshit. . . . [It] makes people like us hope for a smaller, neater world where stories make sense and converge” (228). This is protagonist Cassandra Soelberg’s response when confronted by a man who was adopted as an infant and is seeking to learn more about his birth parents. Since Cassandra’s child was also adopted during the same time frame, the man wonders if she might be his mother. “Could it really be this ridiculously coincidental?” he asks the woman he met in a small-town grocery store (229). Although Cassandra scoffs at the belief that “stories make sense and converge,” throughout the novel *What Falls Away*, by Karin Anderson, she seemingly longs for such a result to make sense of her own story.

Switching between present and past, Anderson’s novel details Cassandra and the legacy of her early years in the fictional town of Big Horn, Utah. At sixteen years old, this paradoxically naive and pregnant young woman was abused and/or abandoned by the people who should have protected her: her father and mother, her brothers, her “lover,” and her religious leaders. Forty years later, she returns home to care for her mother, who is incapacitated by dementia.

Having avoided her hometown since moving away to college, Cassandra is conflicted about her return. The opening lines of the novel assure Cassandra and readers “that she’s come to terms with Clearlake Valley, even Big Horn itself” (5). However, the next sentence undermines this assurance with a hope that, after this visit, “she might be

able to frame it and walk away” (5). As a successful artist, Cassandra understands the power of a frame. A frame creates boundaries and confines a view; it highlights certain aspects and minimizes others. Perhaps her time in Big Horn as a rational adult, freed from the confusion and constraints of family and religion, will give Cassandra the perspective to understand and then walk away from her past.

Raised a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Cassandra was taught that chastity was the ultimate goal for young women. Ironically, she was also taught that the primary role for women was to entice men into marrying them.

No wonder teenaged Cassandra was ill prepared for her first date, the junior prom, with small-town hotshot Allan White. Anderson powerfully depicts Cassandra’s confusion and paralysis as Allan manipulates her throughout the evening. For example, when he grabs her wrist to prevent her from opening the car door (“Ladies wait for the gentleman to open the door”), she can’t interpret her feelings about Allan. This inability to comprehend what she feels follows her throughout the evening, magnified by an inexplicable fear that she will fail what she senses is some type of test of her womanhood and value to her family. As a result, Cassandra was “so encompassed by fear there was no contrasting sensation to distinguish it. . . . All of it added up to blank compliance” (117).

Two months later, Cassandra is pregnant. She is taken away, in the middle of the night, to a city far from home, where she gives birth, gives up her baby, and then returns to her life in Utah, where it is expected that she will repent and reclaim the future that had been planned for her.

Sadly, Cassandra’s fictional narrative matches story upon story of real teenage girls in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other predominantly Christian countries. These young girls were warehoused until their babies were born and denied the opportunity to even hold these newborns, let alone choose the fate of

these children. The frequency of these actions were so common that the decades of the 1950–1970s are now called the “Baby Scoop Era,” as four million unwed mothers “surrendered” their babies to adoption.¹

This is a story that needs to be told because the legacy of the Baby Scoop Era is still with us. In discussing this novel with family, my sister, similar in age to Cassandra, remembered watching the TV commercials that advertised “safe” homes for unwed mothers, places where they could hide the shame of their pregnancies and return home, unencumbered, because they had gifted their children to worthy, married couples. Forty years later, the children from these adoptions are still seeking answers about their birth parents. Some stories have been captured in historical works such as Rickie Solinger’s *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v Wade*. Others are told by those directly affected by this practice. For example, the Mothers Project was started by Celeste Billhartz, the child of a teenage mother, who believed her birth mother didn’t want her. Speaking of her purpose behind the Mothers Project, Billhartz states: “I have interviewed many mothers from the infamous BSE ‘baby scoop era’ (1950–1970’s) and they, like our girl/mothers of previous generations, never got over the loss of their babies. It is important that these stories be told so their children—now in their 30’s, 40’s and older—know they were not ‘gifts’ joyously, gratefully handed to strangers, and forgotten. We were loved and missed, all our lives.”²

Anderson paints a vision of this loss, as sixty-year-old Cassandra still struggles in the liminal space of being a mother who is not a mother. Other women in the novel who lost children to death are allowed to mourn their losses and anxiously await being reunited with their loved ones, while Cassandra can’t even speak of her child.

1. The Baby Scoop Era Research Initiative, “What Was the ‘Baby Scoop Era?’,” <https://babyscoopera.com/home/what-was-the-baby-scoop-era/>.

2. Celeste Billhartz, “About the Mothers Project,” Mothers Project, 2007, <http://themothersproject.com/about/aboutTMP.html>.

So this story needed to be told. I just wish it had been told in a different book. A more evenly written novel. Ironically, Cassandra explains why such a story is difficult to write. Telling stories such as this “makes us hope until we’re too hurt and tired to think in rational ways” (228). While Cassandra’s hurt and exhaustion is understandably justified, the novel succumbs to that hurt and irrationality so frequently that the power of this story dissipates with each caricature of religious fundamentalists, an oversexed patriarchy, and bejeweled-jean-wearing women who cannot think for themselves and fear anyone who might.

Cassandra’s family is dysfunctional, and her father is abusive. Her father, Hal Soelberg, warps his religious beliefs (and those of his family) to justify his selfish and destructive behaviors. Interestingly, Anderson makes Hal one of the few compelling figures in the novel. Cassandra was “direly afraid of him” although “he never hit her” (62). And although “he had hit her brothers plenty, . . . he laughed and chattered and romped among them too” (63). Hal’s mother tries to give her granddaughter, and the readers, some insight into Hal, as she explains, “Something’s awfully fragile in your father’s picture of himself. . . . He needs other men to approve. It’s just a thing to know about him, not a thing to try and fix” (64).

However, Anderson isn’t content just to show how a family can suffer because of the father’s flaws and complexities. Instead, every male Mormon in Big Horn is, at minimum, an oversexed purveyor of the patriarchy; according to Anderson, most are rapists and child molesters as well. Some are polygamists, and those who aren’t apparently dream of the day when their wives will accept polygamy so these men can give into their religiously sanctioned promiscuity.

Regrettably, this novel suffers from what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of the single story.” Adichie explains that a single story is one particular view of a person, a people, or a country. She states, “How to create a single story [is to] show a people as one

thing, as only one thing, over and over again.”³ This is what Anderson does in her depiction of Mormons living in Big Horn, Utah.

Anderson creates a few exceptional characters that are three dimensional and original. The Relief Society president Toni Fuller has both a genuine love for and humorous critique of the members in her ward. And Cassandra’s brother Brian brilliantly transforms the image of fatherhood that he was given as a child. One of the best scenes in the novel occurs when Brian sees that a small child has peed his pants. As children, if Brian and his brothers had an accident, Hal Soelberg would strip his boys naked and shame them in the front yard as he hosed them down for all to see. In contrast, Brian lovingly strips the little boy to his underpants and invites all the grandchildren to do the same, turning what could have been a shameful memory into a joyous run through the sprinklers.

Unfortunately, the other characters in the novel are reduced to farce. Cassandra’s brother James only speaks in pronouncements such as “I say in the name of the Lord that ye must not defile the faith of this religious family” and “If you intended to make contact with our descendants, I must ask you to go through the proper channels” (189–190). James’s Stepford wife, Paige, leaves a note for Cassandra stating, “I’m sorry I can’t be here to greet you but I took the opportunity to put dinner on our own table. For once” (15). Even Brian’s wife, Elaine, preaches, “Brian is the head of this household. He holds the keys to our family salvation. I promised when I became his wife to honor and obey him. The prophets say that even if a priesthood holder directs his wife to do the wrong thing, she will be blessed for her obedience” (259).

Not only does this Mormon caricature undermine Anderson’s skill as a writer, but it diminishes the power of Cassandra’s story. In the middle of the novel, Anderson describes what is essentially a kidnapping. A pregnant Cassandra is spirited away to Washington state and

3. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” TED-Global, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.

the Grunfeldts' home for fallen girls. However, the description of her time in Washington is created through clichés and tortured metaphors: "Brother Grunfeldt lived for his hour (plus) of glory—unhinged flights of fancy as he taught the Gospel Doctrine class. . . . 'Your residence here, sisters, is much like serving time in spirit prison.' . . . Brother Grunfeldt belched words like thesaurus confetti, enamored of his unctuous voice" (203–204). Anderson's forced language made me dismiss the entire scene as hyperbole. Later on, as I learned more about the Baby Scoop Era, I read a passage from historian Rickie Solinger that described Cassandra's exact experience: "Unwed mothers were defined by psychological theory as not-mothers. . . . As long as these females had no control over their reproductive lives, they were subject to the will and the ideology of those who watched over them. And the will, veiled though it often was, called for unwed mothers to acknowledge their shame and guilt, repent, and rededicate themselves."⁴ As mentioned previously, I had dismissed the entire section as hyperbolic melodramaticism, motivated by Anderson's desire to make Mormons seem weirder than she'd already painted them. In actuality, this type of re-doctrination probably happened repeatedly across the country throughout the 1950–1970s, regardless of religious affiliation. What if Anderson had just sketched the scene, letting readers understand the significance of this horror for themselves?

Every time a Mormon speaks in the novel, I am reminded of a 2022 review of *Under the Banner of Heaven*, a television crime drama set in Utah, written by McKay Coppins, a reporter for the *Atlantic*. Coppins observed, "The characters speak as though their dialogue was written in another language and then run through a creepy-Mormon version of Google Translate."⁵ I feel like Anderson did something similar. Raised as a member of the Church, Anderson might be depicting these

4. Baby Scoop Era Research Initiative, "What Was the 'Baby Scoop Era'?"

5. McKay Coppins, "Under the Banner of Hulu," *Atlantic*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/06/under-the-banner-of-heaven-hulu-mormonism/661279/>

characters based on her memories, but I wish someone like an editor or a Church consultant had intervened and pushed her to create real people rather than this stereotypical community.

As Adichie warns, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” When Anderson forgets the single story of Mormonism and tells Cassandra’s personal story, the novel is captivating; however, too often she seems so intent on presenting what one character describes as “a weird trip to Utah . . . [an] Adventure amidst the Mormons. An old formula.” By doing this, she loses the power of the personal story. I wish Anderson had listened to her own character’s advice. Drop the old formula, the single story of Mormonism, and just tell Cassandra’s story. It’s more than enough.

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Finally! A Scholarly Biography of Joseph F. Smith

Stephen C. Taysom. *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2023. 445 pp. + xvi. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-64769-128-8.

Reviewed by Christopher James Blythe

In the summer of 2009, as a master’s student, I sat in one of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute’s summer seminars when the topic turned to the absence of a biography on Joseph F. Smith. I listened to Terryl Givens